INTOXICATED WITH GOD
Acts 2:1-13
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Pentecost/Communion

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The word on Pentecost is simple, profound, and very good. God is alive and well. There is a power at work among us. It is, in fact, the presence of God; the same God who created us, the God whose gentle providence has been woven into human history. This God, our God, is alive, well and at work in our midst.

The text for the day, read all over the world on this Sunday, has been described as somewhat of a "garbled news bulletin". To the modern mind, uneasy with the very idea of the miraculous, the events described in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles sound a little like science fiction. The disciples of Jesus, as you heard, were in Jerusalem, after the crucifixion, still hiding in their upper room. The city was full of pilgrims, having come to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Suddenly, without much warning apparently, something came over the disciples. Suddenly, passive, defeated men became aggressive, triumphant advocates. Suddenly the kernel of truth which had lain fallow in their hearts since Jesus' death took root and grew and flowered. Suddenly they knew the truth and in that knowing they were given the power to communicate it to others.

The two remarkable realities of Pentecost are not the symbols with which the author chose to describe what happened - the wind and the tongues of fire. Rather, as we think about it carefully, two realities are even more complex, and by my criteria at least, even more astounding. First, the disciples were given a strong new confidence and second, when they began to tell their story, people understood it. I don't know how you define and catalogue your miracles, but for me the transformation of Jesus' disciples and their resultant ability to communicate are more amazing than the supernatural symbolism associated with the event. In terms simple of relevance - a Gospel which has something to do with giving people confidence and strength - and the ability to communicate - is far more important than wind, fire and speaking in tongues. When the people who were involved reflected on their experience later, they confessed that something indeed had come over them. There was more happening on that strange day than met the eye. They became convinced that God was at work among them in a startling new way. When it became necessary to reduce their experience into language they called it the Holy Spirit.

For more reasons than we have time this morning to examine, the modern mind, even the modern Christian mind, is not comfortable with the idea of the Holy Spirit. Christians seem either to make too much of it or too little. The Pentecostal movement focuses on the symbolism of the text and demands that believers show evidence of the power of the Spirit, in the same mode and manner as described in Acts II. The mainline church, a bit embarassed by it all, is inclined to ignore the whole matter.

The message and meaning of the day, however, are integral to the Christian Faith. The word on Pentecost - the word because of Pentecost - is that God is alive and well and at work among us.

The behavior of the disciples was certainly curious. Those who observed it came to a logical conclusion: "These men are drunk," they said. Peter's blessed defense is rich in subtlety. He did not blanche in horror: he did not protest piously that disciples don't get drunk. He said simply, "It's too early in the day."

It was a day of great joy and exuberance and much enthusiasm: a day in which the friends of Jesus, accused of being drunk, found themselves intoxicated with God.

One of the most influential contemporary Christian thinkers is a German, Juergan Moltmann. In his major work The Church in the Power of the Spirit he writes, "Wherever the joy of God can be heard, there is the church. The true church is joy in the spirit." (p.65). From the days of its infancy the Christian Faith has harbored, on paper at least, an intoxicating joy in the goodness of God. At the heart of the Christian experience is a profound joy - on paper at least. The reality of the church, however; - the fact Christians turn to the world, has been quite the opposite. Christian intoxication has looked like depression. If the Christian Church is happy about anything, that fact has not always been clear.

In 1710, a German was visiting London and wrote in his journal the following account of a Sabbath. "In the afternoon to St. James' Park, to see the crowds. No other diversion is allowed on Sunday, which is nowhere more strictly kept; all play forbidden, and public houses closed. Our hostess would not even allow us to play the flute, lest she be punished. Sunday observance was the only visible sign that the English were Christians at all." (The Expository Times, 3/78, p.179, from English Social History, Trevelyan).

A little closer to home, a new collection of Mark Twain material has just been published under the title Letters to the Earth. Twain was no admirer of religion: in fact he saw great humor in the pious posturing of those around him. Listen to him on the subject of going to church.

> "Many men pray, not many of them like to do it. A few pray long, the others make a short cut.
>
> "More men go to church than want to.
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> "To forty-nine men in fifty the Sabbath Day is a dreary, dreary bore.
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> "Of all the men in a church on a Sunday, two thirds are tired when the service is half over, and the rest before it is finished.
>
> "The gladdest moment for all of them is when the preacher uplifts his hands for the benediction. You can hear the soft rustle of relief that sweeps the house, and you recognize that it is eloquent with gratitude..."
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> "Now then, in the earth these people cannot stand much church - an hour and a quarter is the limit, and they draw the line at once a week. That is to say, Sunday. One day in seven; and even there they do not look forward to it with longing..." (p.9,12).

Closer still, John Bierdsdorf, in a recent article, discusses the lack of life and joy and enthusiasm in most worship experiences. He writes: "I call it the 'Free Church Slump'. When the minister says, 'Let us pray', the people droop their heads, slouch down in their seats, and squint their eyes shut. So far have we forgotten our heritage." (The Ministry, 3/78, p.5).

Religion reflects the culture. Rather than judging and correcting, institutional religion is inclined to baptize the best and the worst of the culture around it. And for better or worse one of the strongest models for human behavior in our culture at this time is a cool, detached, slightly cynical posture, expressionless, emotionless. We're nervous about someone who feels anything too deeply. We're uncomfortable with religious passion of any variety. In fact, we had to have something called The Human Potential Movement in the 1960's to tell us that it's all right to have feelings.

Yet, at the same time, we are deeply involved in the process of mood altering. People over thirty drink alcohol and wonder why young people are so enamored with drugs. Young people smoke pot and wonder why the older folks have to have a cocktail in order to enjoy themselves. And in epidemic numbers people of all ages depend on drugs to get going in the morning, get through the stress of the day and fall asleep at night.

Ernest Campbell, former minister of Revised Church in New York City suggests that the appeal of intoxicants is in three feelings which result from their use socially: a sense of community, strength and joy.

The appeal of the neighborhood tavern is, at least in part, the fellowship, the open freindship and sense of community that prevails. Campbell notes that when he was commuting by rail to the city, he always rode the club car. It was lively and enjoyable: people had easy access to one another. And Gordon Cosby, Pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. tells about speaking in a church one evening, to a group of people who were apathetic, unresponsive and apparently very sad. His hotel room was over the cocktail lounge and he was kept awake by singing and laughing from below. How ironical, he thought: the contrast was striking and disturbing.

People need help, often, in order to feel strong. A sense of inadequacy is sometimes dissolved in a martini: two drinks produce a sense of well-being, and three, an unfortunate delusion of infallibility.

And joy. People drink because it releases a capacity for enjoyment. Life may be grim, religion is altogether gloomy, the world doesn't look very hopeful. But, somehow, laughter is possible again after a few belts.

"Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." There's a lot of philosophic truth in that old litany. The appeal of intoxicants has always been the escape from the grimness of life - the every day desperation of many people. The trouble is that we don't die tomorrow; we live. Life goes on.

Wouldn't it be grand if we had at our disposal a resource which would provide the sense of community, the strength and the joy for which our culture turns to intoxicants? The Christian Faith dares to suggest that we do.

We celebrate today an event which contains the best of all possible news. God is alive and well. He loves us and offers us, in His love, peace and joy. Pentecost is the promise that God is not remote, but intimate, and that He draws us together in a new relationship of kindness and respect and caring. It is the promise that His power is our resource: that in His love we may overcome the world. The intoxicant of Pentecost is the sheer, magnificant love of God.

So let us eat, drink and be merry; not in desperation, not because tomorrow we die - but because tomorrow we will live in God's love, and the next day, and the day after that and forever.

Amen.

Our Father: touch our lives with Your spirit. Kindle new love in our hearts. And give us grace to enjoy a life made holy by Your presence. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.